



TO: Stoughton School Committee

FROM: Dr. James F. Walsh, NESDEC Search Consultant

RE: Superintendent Search – Focus Groups

DATE: January 24, 2008

On January 15th and 17th, 2008 NESDEC consultants conducted focus groups among teachers, parents, the administrative leadership team and the school committee.

In the focus groups, individual brainstorming, group consensus and ranking resulted in identified lists of priorities concerning the qualities, characteristics, skills and experiences the new Stoughton superintendent should have (Question #1). Also, priorities were developed concerning the tasks and challenges the new superintendent will need to address in the first 6-12 months (Question #2). The comments of the focus group participants were primarily directed toward the future. There was a deep appreciation of the many good people, practices and programs in the Stoughton Public Schools. At the same time, people were forthcoming about what they see as challenges ahead.

The following report lists the responses by each of the groups to the two questions posed. In those groups where time/logistics allowed, priority ranking is presented. Participants felt quite strongly about some matters while others were important, but not stressed to the extent of priority status. Out of courtesy to all who attended and gave of their time, we included all of the comments.

The introduction to this report includes an executive summary which we believe represents a composite of those areas given greater emphasis. We believe that this information will be helpful to all people involved in the search process. We also recommend that you consider sharing this report with constituencies. We know that those involved would like to see how their comments were reflected. We look forward to reviewing this with you in the near future.

**STOUGHTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
FOCUS GROUPS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

Question #1 – What are the qualities, characteristics, skills and experiences the new Stoughton superintendent should have?

- An educational leader – someone who is in touch with the trends and best practices in education, knows how to apply them in Stoughton
- Twenty-first century vision – has a vision that all kids can be proficient – appreciates how to prepare students for jobs that don't yet exist
- A collaborative approach to leadership; a consensus builder; able to gain support of the leadership team, school committee and community
- Ability to manage relationships with other community agencies and groups – teachers union, town departments, town officials, etc.
- Excellent communication skills
- A good listener
- Approachable, accessible
- High visibility
- Successful experience in a community similar to Stoughton
- Understands how budgets work, is a strong fiscal manager, proven ability to secure resources
- Ability to develop a healthy working relationship with the school committee, ability to deal with multiple agendas, personalities, issues while helping set a respectful tone
- Understands and is committed to issues of diversity
- An ambassador, someone who is an advocate for the school system, a strong voice for the schools; a champion for the schools

***not in priority order**

**STOUGHTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
FOCUS GROUPS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

Question #2 – What are the major challenges and tasks the new superintendent will face in the first 6-12 months?

- Develop an entry plan – communicate with and listen to all constituencies within the schools and community; develop a collaborative needs assessment; communicate findings and recommendations to the community
- Establish relationships – get to know people in the schools
- Be highly visible in the schools and community – in schools and at events
- Continue to build a unified leadership team – build trust – infuse new people with the team
- Learn and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the system before implementing change
- Find out what is happening that works well in the system, build upon those practices
- Develop a healthy working relationship with the school committee – open communication
- Analyze the budget – what we have, what we need – develop a plan of action
- Show support for teachers
- Be a champion and advocate for schools
- Share your vision and values with the teachers and administrators
- Develop strong working relationship with town officials
- Begin to develop a new strategic plan – involve all constituencies
- Forge a working relationship with the union

***not in priority order**

**STOUGHTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
FOCUS GROUP REPORTS**

**FOCUS GROUP #1 – SYSTEMWIDE ADMINISTRATIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM
JANUARY 15, 2008**

Question #1 – What are the qualities, characteristics, skills and experiences the new Stoughton superintendent should have?

5 Highest Priorities (in priority order)

1. Collaborative approach to leadership/consensus builder/able to gain support of leadership team, school committee and community
2. Humanistic – relates to teachers and students, empathizes/values opinions of personnel working with him/her
3. Good communication skills
4. Budget or business management skills and experience
5. Ability to manage relationships with other community agencies and groups – teachers union, town departments, town officials, etc.

Other Comments (not in priority order)

- Has a vision of where the system is going
- Experience with diversified school population
- Teaching experience of at least 5 years
- Will stay for a few years
- Knowledge about supervision and evaluation
- Visible
- Knowledgeable about curriculum
- A leader, not a manager
- Has worked with a socio-economic community similar to Stoughton
- Ability to manage school building projects
- Experience as a principal
- A good listener

Question #2 – What are the major challenges and tasks the new superintendent will face in the first 6-12 months?

4 Highest Priorities (in priority order)

1. Establishing relationships
2. Maintaining a budget that will support programs
3. Continuing the development of a unified leadership team (with new members)
4. Build a collaborative network

Other Comments (not in priority order)

- Develop an entry plan
- Building projects – plan and vision
- Sit back and survey the situation
- Establish parameters for role of school committee
- Forge a working relationship with the union
- Insure elementary literacy program gets off to a good start

FOCUS GROUP #2 – TEACHERS – JANUARY 15, 2008

Question #1 – What are the qualities, characteristics, skills and experiences the new Stoughton superintendent should have?

(Not in priority order)

- Good communicator
- Good manager (CEO for the business of the schools)
- Energetic
- Approachable/accessible
- An ambassador: the voice of the school system – public relations
- Advocate for the schools
- Strong educational background at managerial level
- Someone who is aware and has grasp of education reform (MCAS, legal, etc.)
- Believes in Stoughton’s core values, mission statement and strategic plan
- A visionary

Question #2 – What are the major challenges and tasks the new superintendent will face in the first 6-12 months?

(Not in priority order)

- Visibility in schools
- Learning from principals – what happens in schools
- Understanding dynamics of faculty and staff (what makes them “tick”)
- Makes himself/herself known in the community
- Gets to know the faculty
- Understands demographics of town – goes to events/is an ambassador
- Find out what we are doing that works and familiarize self with programs and people
- Deal with new leadership team (transition issues with many new people)
- Plan for facilities update

FOCUS GROUP #3 – SCHOOL COMMITTEE MEMBERS – JANUARY 17, 2008

Question #1 – What are the qualities, characteristics, skills and experiences the new Stoughton superintendent should have?

6 Highest Priorities (in priority order)

1. Twenty-first century vision – has a vision that all kids will be proficient – appreciates how to prepare kids for jobs that don't yet exist
2. Educational leader – an inspiring leader
3. Understands how the budget works/strong fiscal manager, fiscally responsible, able to secure financial resources – gaining support, grants, etc.
4. Good communicator with staff, school committee and the community
5. Strong motivational skills
6. Someone who has strength to lead, but not take things personally

Other Comments (not in priority order)

- Strong work ethic
- Knowledgeable about what needs to be done to help kids be proficient
- Interacts with others – collaborative approach
- Appreciates diversity (including academic) of student body – work for all of the students
- Understands the culture and climate of Stoughton
- Understands issues that may confront a superintendent – understands system overall
- Has a professional demeanor
- Able to know what he/she doesn't know
- Knows the right questions to ask from the beginning, e.g., ELL, Special Ed, Title I – questions about staffing and effective programs
- Doesn't feel they need to make changes immediately, but willing to make changes when warranted
- Ability to deal with a school committee with varied personalities, priorities, issues and agendas – and be able to foster a respectful climate when there are disagreements
- Ability to work with other boards, officials, town meeting (political savvy)

Question #2 – What are the major challenges and tasks the new superintendent will face in the first 6-12 months?

4 Highest Priorities (in priority order)

1. Build an administrative team by building trust and close communication – facilitate and delegate responsibility
2. Learn and understand the strength/weaknesses of the system before implementing change
3. Leadership modeling, motivating, coaching a new “team”

4. Dealing with the school committee – developing a good working relationship – open communication

Other Comments (not in priority order)

- Develop a collaborative needs assessment
- Develop (update) strategic plan and implement it – work with community
- Focus on facilities project planning
- Involvement in health insurance challenge with municipal officials
- Encourage community involvement – good listener – values input
- Understand how to retain students in system – assess why some may leave
- Work to create a positive image of the school system and communicate the positives

FOCUS GROUP #4 – PARENTS AND COMMUNITY – JANUARY 17, 2008

Question #1 – What are the qualities, characteristics, skills and experiences the new Stoughton superintendent should have?

5 Highest Priorities (in priority order)

1. Strong leader, proactive and a team leader
2. Ability to gain financial support for the school. A champion to advocate for the system
3. In touch with trends in education – aware of good educational practices
- Tie 4. Progressive, open-minded and innovative, not settling for the status quo
- Tie 4. Experience as an administrator in a similar size, socio-economic community

Other Comments (not in priority order)

- Visible, accessible, open-door
- Had success in another system
- Someone who hasn't moved around too much
- Someone with sensitivity who can take into account the thoughts of others
- Honest, straightforward
- Someone with passion for the job

Question #2 – What are the major challenges and tasks the new superintendent will face in the first 6-12 months? (not in priority order)

- Listen, intake
- Meet and greet at each school
- Develop E-mail Q&A for parents with principals and superintendent with focus on responsiveness
- Analysis of budget – what we have, what we need – perhaps reallocate
- Analyze best practices in other systems that may be applicable to Stoughton
- Share his/her vision with teachers and administrators
- Show support for teachers; develop professional relationships. Engage with the teachers; create inclusive environment, work toward common goals
- Take some time to look at system before moving too aggressively
- (Interview question for candidates – “State your vision....”)